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RUEHPG/AMEMBASSY PRAGUE PRIORITY 0054
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3951
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9199
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RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 1053
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1098
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3423
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 COLOMBO 000431

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BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/AFDA MROGERS AND POL (ESEN)
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [EAID](#) [UNGA](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: VISIT BY UNSYG CHIEF OF STAFF NAMBIAR
YIELDS MIXED RESULTS

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Classified By: Ambassador Robert Blake for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: The April 16-17 visit to Sri Lanka by UNSYG Chief of Staff Vijay Nambiar yielded mixed results. After a one-on-one breakfast meeting with President Rajapaksa on April 17, Nambiar reported that Rajapaksa had left only a slim opening for the UN to pursue the release of civilians by the LTTE as part of the ICRC's regular visits to the safe zone to evacuate wounded. In a subsequent lunch hosted by the Foreign Minister for Nambiar attended by Ambassador, the Foreign Ministry clarified that the GSL is prepared to allow a working-level UN team to go in to the safe zone with the ICRC to explore the possibilities of the LTTE allowing the UN and ICRC to evacuate civilians by ea. He said that if there was any positive response from the LTTE and some civilians were allowed to leave, the GSL "would not rule out" the possibility of a future higher-level UN effort to get larger numbers of civilians out. Both the President and Foreign Minister refused UN, US, EU and Indian suggestions of a humanitarian pause now, arguing that such a pause at this stage would give the LTTE a chance to re-group and forcibly recruit and train more civilians. The Foreign Minister said the GSL would allow short pauses for the delivery of food and medicine, evacuation of wounded, and the working-level UN visit. Ambassador underscored to the Minister the potential serious consequences internationally of pursuing a military

option without giving diplomacy a chance. UN Resident Representative Buhne told Ambassador the UN will send a UN security advance team to the safe zone as soon as possible with a view to sending in the working-level team as soon as possible thereafter. COMMENT: Although this outcome was not all that we hoped for, it nonetheless leaves an opening for a possible higher-level UN effort, provided the LTTE cooperates in releasing to the working level UN team at least some civilians as a sign of good faith. In the meantime, the international community must continue to pressure the GSL to agree to a pause and to cease military actions. End Summary.

Meeting with Defense Secretary

12. (C) UN Resident Representative Neil Buhne briefed Co-Chair Ambassadors April 17 on UNSYG Chief of Staff Vijay Nambiar's meeting the previous day with Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa. Gothabaya said he opposed a humanitarian pause on the grounds that the LTTE had allowed virtually no civilians to leave the safe zone during the 48-hour pause earlier in the week. He indicated that military forces are now preparing to enter the safe zone in an effort to separate LTTE cadres from civilians. He insisted that military actions would be conducted with precision to minimize civilian casualties. Gothabaya considered that the LTTE had been severely weakened and were left with only approximately 100 hard core cadres in the safe zone. (Comment: we believe this underestimates LTTE strength. Army Commander Fonseka told Ambassador and DATT last week that the LTTE still had 600-700 hard core fighters and 300 Sea Tigers. Further, it seems unlikely that only 100 cadres would be in a position to prevent the departure of tens of thousands of civilians who want to leave while

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continuing to mount stiff opposition to the Army's attempts to penetrate the safe zone.)

13. (C) Nambiar then joined the Co-Chair Ambassadors after coming directly from a one-on-one breakfast meeting with President Rajapaksa. He reported that the President strongly opposed any extension of the humanitarian pause. He insisted that any pause would only give the LTTE an opportunity to regroup and rearm. Nambiar countered that a military operation that produced large civilian casualties would be a public relations disaster for the government and play directly into the hands of the LTTE. The President replied that he was fully aware of the importance of preventing civilian casualties, but was simply unwilling to give the LTTE a new lease on life, adding "we have the LTTE where we want them." He acknowledged that Tamils must be part of a future political process and for this reason the government would make every effort to minimize civilian casualties. The President claimed that the attacks launched on April 16 occurred outside the safe zone.

14. (C) The President voiced strong opposition to a possible UN role in negotiating a humanitarian pause or a surrender by the LTTE, asking, "how can the UN consider having contact with a terrorist organization?" He categorically ruled out the possibility of the UN entering into negotiations directly with Prabhakaran. Nambiar replied that an envoy's role would be limited to achieving the specific humanitarian objective of persuading the LTTE to allow trapped civilians to leave the safe zone and such an effort would be fully coordinated with the government. The President insisted that there was no guarantee that the LTTE would release civilians and that there were clear indications that the LTTE would not cooperate in a release.

15. (C) The one area in which the President gave any ground at all was his willingness to consider a UN role (which he did not specifically define) in a possible ICRC evacuation of civilians by sea. He conceded that the involvement of the UN, side by side with the ICRC, might possibly persuade more

civilians to try to leave the safe zone. (Comment: The ICRC is already evacuating wounded civilians by sea, and the President did not discuss what additional assets would be used to effect a larger scale sea evacuation. In addition, the LTTE has been strictly controlling which and how many civilians it has allowed to leave by ICRC flagged vessels, and has given no indication that it would be inclined to significantly increase these numbers.)

Government Moderates Its Position

16. (C) The government moderated its position somewhat at a lunch hosted by the Foreign Minister for Nambiar before Nambiar's departure for Delhi. The Foreign Minister and Additional Secretary Prasad Kariyaswam clarified the GSL was prepared to allow a "working-level" UN team from Colombo to go in to the safe zone with the ICRC to explore the possibilities of the LTTE allowing the UN and ICRC to evacuate civilians by sea. He and the Minister said that if

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there was any positive response from the LTTE and some civilians were allowed to leave, the GSL "would not rule out" the possibility of a future higher-level UN effort to negotiate an LTTE release of larger numbers of civilians.

But No Pause

17. (C) The Foreign Minister continued to maintain that the GSL could not agree to a humanitarian pause because that would allow the LTTE to regroup, forcibly recruit and train new civilians potentially to attack the Sri Lankan military forces. The Minister reiterated that the Sri Lankan army would open up humanitarian corridors to allow civilians to escape while doing everything possible to avoid civilian casualties. Ambassador pointed out that seventy civilians had been killed on April 16 with many more wounded. This was an unacceptably high level of casualties. The Minister expressed surprise at the casualty report. Both the UN and ICRC confirmed that those were the figures provided by the make-shift hospital in the safe zone. The Minister then raised the familiar GSL question of how the UN and ICRC distinguished between civilian and combatant casualties. ICRC Chief Paul Castella responded that many of those being evacuated by the ICRC are women and children. Indian High Commissioner Prasad added that Indian doctors at the Indian Health facility treating wounded at Pulmoddai had the same information.

US Warns of Potential Consequences of Military Option

18. (C) Ambassador took the opportunity to underline the importance of the GSL supporting a humanitarian pause and a diplomatic solution. He pointed out that at present, much of the world recognizes that the LTTE is holding civilians against their will. If the GSL pursues a military option without allowing a high level UN diplomatic effort to secure the release of all civilians, the GSL will be seen around the world as the aggressor and the party responsible for the high number of civilian casualties that would certainly occur. He underlined that the United States and many other countries are seriously concerned about the already high number of civilian casualties. He told the Minister that comparisons are already being made to what transpired in Rwanda where the international community did not do enough to prevent a catastrophe.

19. (C) Ambassador warned the Minister that if the government pursued a military option without first allowing high-level diplomacy a chance, Sri Lanka could expect escalating international criticism and actions to demonstrate the international community's concern. The Ambassador said such actions could include suspension of aid to Sri Lanka, closer

scrutiny of IMF lending, possible war crimes investigations, and perhaps other actions. EU Head of Mission Savage echoed the Ambassador's comments, noting the importance of Sri Lanka protecting civilians and giving the LTTE an opportunity to surrender. He said the loss of civilian lives from ongoing military operations would be a humanitarian and public

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relations disaster for Sri Lanka "which would snatch defeat from the jaws of victory." Indian High Commissioner Prasad agreed and referred to a very tough statement the Indian Foreign Ministry had issued earlier in the day. He said there is "extreme concern" in India about civilian casualties. India did not see why further military action was necessary at this time and supports a humanitarian pause.

¶10. (C) The Foreign Minister assured Prasad that Sri Lanka is sensitive to Indian and other concerns, but repeated that a pause would only give oxygen to the LTTE. He said Sri Lanka needed the help of the Tamil Diaspora to persuade the LTTE to release its civilians. Ambassador briefed the minister on the results of the meeting Assistant Secretary Boucher had hosted with American Diaspora representatives. He explained that the Diaspora had rejected U.S. calls for them to urge the release of civilians.

Steps to Enhance Prospects for LTTE Releases

¶11. (C) Looking ahead to the visit of UN working-level representatives into the safe zone and possible future higher-level UN visits, Ambassador suggested that the GSL could take two important steps to improve chances of the LTTE agreeing to the release of civilians. First, the GSL needs to adopt and implement clear benchmarks and time tables on such matters as the resettlement of civilians from the camps in Vavuniya and freedom of movement within the camps. A few success stories and clear time tables for implementation of more successes would bolster IDP, donor and Diaspora confidence about GSL intentions. Thus far, such confidence was waning. He cited, for example, pledges by the President's brother and senior Advisor, Basil Rajapaksa, for significant numbers of IDPs from Vavuniya and Mannar to be resettled by the end of April. The GSL would not only not meet that target, it had no clear time table for when it might do so.

¶12. (C) The second step that the GSL could take to enhance prospects for LTTE release of civilians would be for the President to announce his plans for sharing power with Tamils and ensuring them a future of respect and dignity within a united Sri Lanka. Prasad echoed that would be very important for India as well. ICRC Chief Castella added that Basil Rajapaksa also had pledged in February to allow ICRC access to all IDP registration sites. However, the ICRC still did not have access to Pulmoddai, the first stop for all evacuees from the safe zone, nor did it have a presence in Kilinochchi. ICRC access at both sites would do much to build confidence in the registration process.

Comment and Next Steps

¶13. (C) The President's hard line position is likely motivated in part by his need to play to his southern Sinhala political base in the elections for the Western Provincial Council that will take place later this month. However, his

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visit to Kilinochchi to meet with the troops may have reinforced his conviction that the government finally has the LTTE trapped with a military victory in close reach. We are encouraged that the Foreign Ministry left an opening for a

possible higher-level UN effort, provided the LTTE cooperates in releasing to the working level UN team at least some civilians as a sign of good faith. UN Resident Representative Buhne told Ambassador the UN will send a UN security advance team to the safe zone as soon as possible with a view to sending in the working-level team as soon as possible thereafter. In the meantime, the international community must continue to pressure the GSL to agree to a pause and cease military actions to allow diplomacy to work. It is also important that no public mention be made of a possible UN effort to release civilians, lest Sinhala nationalists seek to capitalize on the upcoming elections to force the GSL to back down from even the limited concessions they have made.

BLAKE